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Viewing cable 09BOGOTA646, BOGOTA MAYOR STRUGGLES AS POLO PARTY SEEKS TO SET

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09BOGOTA646	2009-02-26 14:19	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Bogota

Appears in these articles:

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PP RUEHWEB

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 000646

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2019

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SUBJECT: BOGOTA MAYOR STRUGGLES AS POLO PARTY SEEKS TO SET ITS COURSE

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Bogota Mayor Samuel Moreno of the leftist Polo Party has been slammed by the media over a perceived "collapse" in the city--especially in mobility and security. Amidst rapidly falling poll ratings, Moreno has also faced tough criticism from members of his own party. Polo Senator Gustavo Petro publicly accused Moreno of filling his cabinet with party hacks, and Polo President Carlos Gaviria told us he was "appalled" at Moreno's bad start. Gaviria fears Moreno's poor performance will damage Polo's prospects in the 2010 presidential elections and provide "justification" to far-left elements in Polo that favor bullets over ballots. Moreno expects things to turn around, citing police crime data and planned public works projects. His faction holds the balance of power between the Polo's hard-left wing and more moderate elements. End Summary.

SEMANA: "DO SOMETHING, SAMUEL!"

¶2. (U) Leading news weekly "Semana" magazine, responding to a growing "sense that Bogota was collapsing," published a sensational cover-story on January 25 urging Bogota Mayor Samuel Moreno to "do something" to turn the city around. "Semana" reported that a series of problems--including a "gordian knot" of traffic, deteriorating security, and a lack of a clearly articulated vision for the city--had led to the perception that Bogota was in a downward spiral. The article noted that Moreno's approval ratings have fallen from 60% to 32% since taking office.

¶3. (U) Moreno, born in Miami, Florida (1960), following the controversial presidency of his grandfather General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, is a former three-term senator from the leftist Polo Democratico Party. He won the Bogota mayor's seat--widely considered the second most important elected office in Colombia after the presidency--in 2007 with a record vote count over former center-right Mayor Enrique Penalosa. He took office in January, 2008. Moreno's mother Maria Rojas was a presidential candidate in the 1970s, and his brother Ivan Moreno is a Polo Party senator. Moreno comes from his grandfather's populist, patronage-based political tradition and is not known for strong ideological positions. Ivan's tenure as mayor of Bucaramanga was marked by numerous corruption scandals.

SECURITY AND TRAFFIC

¶4. (U) Complaints against Moreno center on worsening traffic and security, and Moreno's lack of action to fix the problems. The city has seen a 50% increase in the number of privately owned vehicles since 2005 (to nearly 1.4 million), while few major road projects have been completed. A recent poll showed that 55% percent of Bogota residents do not feel secure in the city, compared to 39% in January 2008. Thirty-nine percent report being a victim of crime, compared to 26% in 2007. Respondents said they are most fearful of organized crime, common crime, youth gangs, and the socioeconomic factors (unemployment) that lead to crime.

CRITICISM MOUNTS

¶5. (C) Political leader from across the spectrum --especially within Moreno's own Polo Party--have sharpened their criticism of the mayor as attacks from the media continue. Polo Party President Carlos Gaviria told us that he was "appalled at how bad" Moreno's term has begun. He said he

told Moreno in November him that, as party president, he would continue to support him, "but you need to give me something to work with!" Gaviria said he was hearing increasing rumors of corruption in Moreno's cabinet. He said

that if solid information emerged on corruption, his support for Moreno would end. Gaviria said he was especially worried about Moreno's Secretary of Government, Clara Lopez (and her husband), who managed the city's contracts.

¶6. (C) Polo Senator Gustavo Petro, a potential Polo presidential candidate, publicly criticized the mayor for not embracing common sense policies on democratic security and for allowing government corruption. He called on Moreno to use his power in the Polo to reform the party. Liberal Party Senator Juan Fernando Cristo, a close Moreno friend, told us separately that Moreno was too nice a guy to keep his people on task and out of the public coffers. He said he recently advised Moreno to "get tough" and make bold moves to break the negative perception trend.

MORENO'S DEFENSE

¶7. (C) Moreno told us over lunch on February 18 that he recognizes that he has a major perception problem, but claimed the facts showed a more positive picture. He said the "Semana" article was published on orders of managing director Alejandro Santos after Santos was stuck in a traffic jam following a rainstorm and flash flood. Moreno conceded the growing traffic problems, but said his government was launching a record number of construction projects and would have final designs for a planned Metro system ready by the end of 2009. He had also tightened restrictions on the use of private vehicles.

¶8. (C) The mayor also asserted that the facts do not support public perceptions of worsening security. Bogota Police reported a small fall in homicides in Bogota for 2008 (reftel), and other common crimes (robbery, car theft) dropped nearly 15%. Moreno said the recent FARC bombing of a Blockbuster video store and the murder of a young journalism student in Bogota's main night-life district created a media frenzy. He responded by increasing security in the areas, banning open alcohol consumption, and instituting curfews for minors. The media, Moreno complained, reported on the student's murder for days after the event, but ignored the fact that at the same time Bogota saw its first three day stretch without a murder in decades. Moreno said he maintains solid relations with President Uribe and key GOC security officials despite highly-publicized run-ins with Defense Minister and presidential contender Juan Manuel Santos.

MAYOR AS POWER BROKER ON THE LEFT

¶9. (C) Polo Senator Gustavo Petro told us Moreno's "populist" group holds the balance of power in the Polo between the hard-core left (Communists and Maoists) and the center-left (Petro, former-Bogota Mayor Lucho Garzon, and former Foreign Minister Maria Emma Mejia). The Moreno brothers continue to talk to both Petro and the hard left, but Petro said the problem was that Moreno's group consists of opportunists who are in government only to make money. Petro added that former President Ernesto Samper--who named four members of Moreno's original cabinet--is also influential with Moreno, making him even more unreliable.

¶10. (C) Carlos Gaviria told us Moreno's performance as mayor and his role as king maker in the Polo could determine the fate of the Party and impact its performance in the 2010 presidential elections. The Polo will hold its party congress February 27-29, and center-left leaders including Garzon and Petro told us they would leave the Party if hard core leftists --opposed to forming moderate coalitions with a chance to win elections--take control. Moreno's group controls the balance, and Gaviria fears that the Polo could split if the far left and centrist camps cannot come together. Former-President Cesar Gaviria told us separately

that his Liberal Party would take a "big tent" approach in 2010, and would welcome the Polo's center-leftists.

¶11. (C) CarlosGaviria said a failed Moreno Administration in Bogota--which represents up to 25% of all voters in the country--could help lead to a "devastating" result for any Polo presidential candidate. He also fears a poor Polo showing could give ammunition to far-left elements who argue for the continued need to use "all forms of struggle" (violence) instead of the ballot box.

BROWNFIELD

=====CABLE ENDS=====